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ABSTRACT

Contemporary syntactic theory rejects the idea that prescriptive grammar can provide students with any insights into how language works. For generative grammar, a term for the aggregate of methodologies which currently dominates modern linguistics, rules determining the grammaticality of a sentence do not relate in any way to the rules which make up "good grammar." Prescriptive grammar has also suffered assaults from specialists in American dialectology. Proponents of grammar instruction have by no means ignored attacks, and it might be argued that the controversies of the past several decades have had a positive effect on grammar teaching. Current theoretical and methodological perspectives show that the field of grammar is undergoing a major self-renovation. The essays reviewed in this topical bibliography and commentary show that new studies in the teaching of grammar usually reflect the insights of contemporary linguistic theory and sociolinguistics. The bibliography/commentary concludes that the work of Tony Burgess shows that though it has undergone a vigorous assault, and though teachers' organizations discourage its use, grammatical instruction has been difficult to erase from the English curriculum. Lists 3 Internet resources and 10 references. (NKA)

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New Studies in the Teaching of English Grammar

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Introduction

For decades grammar instruction has been under attack from a variety of groups. Contemporary syntactic theory rejects the idea that prescriptive grammar can provide students with any insights into how language works. For generative grammar, a term for the aggregate of methodologies which currently dominates modern linguistics, rules determining the grammaticality of a sentence do not relate in any way to the rules which make up "good grammar."

Prescriptive grammar has also suffered assaults from specialists in American dialectology. The pioneering work of figures such as William Labov demonstrated that substrata of American English usually judged in the classroom environment to be "bad" English (e.g., African-American English) were in fact as complex grammatically as Standard English. American dialects that are of low status in the classroom are almost always the dialects of underprivileged ethnic and class groupings; Standard English heavily imitates dialects spoken (or once spoken) by the American upper class. Thus it has been difficult for educators not to view the teaching of prescriptive grammar as a species of oppression, since it is (according to the standard narrative) intended to make students ashamed of the literacies of their homes and communities and to encourage them to assume the language of white upper-class speakers of English.

Proponents of grammar instruction have by no means ignored these attacks, and it might be argued that the controversies of the past several decades have had a positive effect on grammar teaching. Current theoretical and methodological perspectives show that the field of grammar is undergoing a major self-renovation (Hassan, 2001). The proceedings of the Annual Conference for the Teaching of English Grammar show that the majority of studies delivered demonstrated an awareness of grammar's ideologically vexed position within primary and secondary education (see especially Salih, 1994; Griffith, 1994; Hartnett, 1994).

Likewise, a collection of essays published in the same year, *Language Issues: Readings for Teachers* (Durkin, 1995), shows that the notion of grammar as a code of formal rules for the production of "good" English is no longer viable among teachers of grammar. As the title implies, these studies aim to make elementary and high school teachers aware of the complex issues surrounding the teaching of language. Of particular concern are subjects such as bilingualism, the cognitive processes of second-language acquisition, non-standard English and alternatives to teaching prescriptive grammar. Many of the essays are by the leading sociolinguists of the last half-century whose work has argued for the importance of non-standard English as a key to understanding relations between disparate class and ethnic groups as well as a dignified language in its own right (see esp. Labov, 1995; Heath, 1995).

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The essays reviewed in this summary show that new studies in the teaching of grammar usually reflect the insights of contemporary linguistic theory and sociolinguistics. Some in the field of grammar also want to show that grammar instruction at all levels of the curriculum has the potential to improve the teaching of literature and many other subjects. Contemporary studies in the teaching of grammar aim not so much to encourage students and teachers to develop an awareness of the grammatical relations between words as they do to facilitate an ability to use this awareness as a tool for the analysis (both critical and explicative) of written texts. Where instruction in prescriptive or "proper" grammar is advocated, direct instruction in grammar is almost never the preferred medium.

Authentic Contexts

John G. Barnitz's essay of 1998 reflects the hostility of contemporary linguistics to traditional grammar instruction, but does not reject the idea of prescriptive grammar instruction. Barnitz argues that what has been wrong with the traditional instruction in "good grammar" is that activities such as parsing and sentence-diagramming—the staple activity of grammar instruction since the 1960's according to Barnitz (1998)—are unrelated to any authentic contexts of language use:

> [Parsing and sentence-diagramming] are different abilities than composing and comprehending authentic texts and sentences within texts. I learned much more about using language and developed my own intuitions about grammar within authentic communicative contexts. In high school, for example, I acquired much sentence structure awareness while writing and editing scripts for our school's closed-circuit TV station as a writer/producer and while making news stories fit the page constraints of our weekly school newspaper as layout-production editor (p. 1).

For Barnitz, "authentic" contexts are not necessarily "real-world" contexts. What Barnitz seems to be arguing is that while learning to recognize (for example) subordinate and main clauses is indeed an important skill for young students, it contributes little to their ability to manipulate in their own writing the complex syntactic structures they will encounter in expository and literary prose. Producing student writers who are able to use these complex structures fluently is for Barnitz the principal goal of writing instruction. Barnitz suggests activities which encourage students to "try on" the complex syntax of literary prose with "fill in the blanks" exercises that permit them to add their own words to pre-made sentences (p. 2). The particular skill that Barnitz wants to foster in student writing is what he calls "sentence structure literacy." It is a skill which has less to do with acquainting students with grammatical terminology than with encouraging them to be comfortable composing sentences that are complex and grammatically accurate:

> The study of language itself is interesting. Studying about how language works is part of learning about how people communicate and think. Indeed, a certain awareness of formal usage is useful for producing edited, formal American English...However, teaching about grammar concepts and usage is not the same as teaching children to write and read sentences within authentic text contexts...Too much classroom discussion time spent on grammatical analysis is time not spent on writing and reading natural discourse of authentic texts, so necessary for literacy abilities and literate language skills to be acquired...We need not spend excessive class time on noncontextualized grammar exercises (Barnitz, 1998, p. 4).

Barnitz's hostility toward "noncontextualized" grammar instruction is reflected in the 16th annual report of the National Council of the Teachers of English (Allender, 1999). Their statement also demonstrates the resolution of the education establishment not to provide instruction in Standard English. The NCTE views teachers' desire to provide direct instruction in grammar as a symptom either of their ignorance of research or of the lack of sufficient time for extensive writing instruction:

> Grammar instruction continues to be an issue for teachers whose efforts to teach it in the context of writing clash with public expectations of direct work with grammar, usage, and Standard English. This persistent issue—of particular consequence for students studying English as a second language—is complicated by several other trends. First, heavy teaching loads may encourage teachers to use grammar drill rather than extensive writing. Second, those with limited preparation to teach writing may use out-of-context grammar instruction more readily than those familiar with the research about the ineffectiveness of the approach. Third, the place of usage and grammar in the rubrics of many assessment instruments raises expectations of parents, policymakers, and some teachers that schools should teach grammar and standard usage directly (Allender, 1999, p. 3).

NCTE also endorses something like the activities proposed by Barnitz (Though not in his name), which they call "formulaic writing," as a means of establishing student proficiency in the writing of prose texts (Allender, 1998, pp. 3-4).

New Uses for Old Methodologies

The arguments summarized above should not give the impression that traditional grammar instruction is without its proponents. An article by Diane Larson-Freeman (1999) mounts a spirited defense of traditional grammar instruction, citing current research which seems to provide counterevidence to the widely held belief that it is not necessary to teach grammar. Larson-Freeman argues especially against the view widely held among linguists (one of the central concepts of generative grammar) that children acquire the grammar of their language without explicit instruction.

While Larson-Freeman's defense of grammar is intended primarily for teachers and parents, another is directed to researchers in the field of education, and is consequently more complex. Tony Burgess's article of 1998 argues in favor of direct, formal grammar instruction (the very kind disparaged by the NCTE) but offers a new conception of the purposes of elementary grammar instruction. Rather than use it solely to improve students' written communication (a goal to which most research has concluded it is ill-equipped), the traditional methods of grammar instruction can become a powerful tool for fostering reading comprehension and critical thinking. Grammar can do so by adding specificity to students' in-class discussions of written texts. Being able to discuss the author's manipulation of verb tenses in a given narrative text, for example, anchors students' analyses to attributes of the text that are explicit and visible.

Conclusion

The work of Burgess shows that though it has undergone a vigorous assault, and though teachers' organizations discourage its use, grammar instruction has been difficult to erase from the curriculum. This is the case since competence in grammatical terms is a prerequisite to any productive and specific analysis of written texts. Though the notion of grammar drills as a means of establishing proficiency in Standard English is dying out even among grammarians, being able to discuss sentence structure with traditional grammatical terminology is a skill which can be put to many other uses than the ones for which it was originally intended.

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Internet Resources:

*The KISS Grammar Site
Dr. Ed Vavra's, Pennsylvania College of Technology professor, home page, including essays on grammar and an online full-text book: *Teaching Grammar as a Liberating Art*
http://nweb.pct.edu/homepage/staff/evavra/KISS_Theory.htm

*Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing
by Constance Weaver, *English Journal*, Nov96
http://www.english.vt.edu/~grammar/GrammarForTeachers/readings/weaver.html

*Why Teach Grammar?
Includes grammar research and teaching suggestions
http://home.csumb.edu/v/varnijannea/world/Grammar/new_page_5.htm

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